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ABSTRACT

Many secondary school principals in Belize had expressed a desire and a strong need to start developing in their students the many and varied skills to be gained from participating in debate. The principals feel that the educational system of Belize is their greatest asset and that adding debate to their curriculum would make it even stronger. To help implement debate in Belize, the Director of Forensics at Ferris State University (Michigan) took a debate team to Belize to demonstrate forensics for the secondary teachers and students. Before leaving for Belize, in addition to learning about the country for the 10-day trip, the team collected all of the debate and communications textbooks available for the students and teachers to use as reference material. The group traveled to many parts of Belize (San Pedro, Southern Belize, Western Belize, Orange Walk District, and Corozal) to lecture and demonstrate. In Corozal, the Belizian students were so eager that they participated in a debate with the Ferris team. It was obvious that Ferris State's efforts had been appreciated and would be a foundation for the Belizians to build on for their future. (MG)

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Belize, Central America: Role of Academic Debate In an Emerging Democracy.

A Paper Presented

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Belize, Central America is sometimes referred to as the world's best kept secret. The word Belize was not even in my vocabulary prior to the Fall of 1985. At that time, the Director of International Programs at Ferris State University mentioned it to me in a conversation. He went on to tell me that the Minister of Education in Belize had discussed the possibility of getting debate started in their secondary school system.

When I had a chance to discuss the trip with some of the Secondary Principals of Belize, I discovered that they had been trying for over two years to get such a program started in their country. They expressed a desire and a strong need to start developing the many and varied skills gained from participating in debate. The Principal explained to me that in Belize the educational system is considered their greatest asset and that adding debate to their curriculum would make it even stronger.

Primarily, it will be my purpose in this paper to explain how the experience of teaching debate and a trip to Belize developed into one of the greatest opportunities of my career. First, I will discuss the preparation for the trip. Secondly, the time spent in Belize will be examined. The last area will cover all the period of time since we returned to Ferris.

The Director of International Programs told me in early November that the trip was fairly certain and that he would get back to us with the exact dates. At that point we, the debaters and myself, felt it was just talk that would soon be forgotten. Much to our surprise we were given an early Christmas present. When the Director of International Programs informed us that the tickets had been purchased and we, our debaters, my wife and myself, would be leaving for Belize in late February.

A major effort that we began immediately was to learn about Belize and the people we would be working with for our ten day stay. We found that Belize had taken the name Belize in 1981 when it gained its independence. Prior to 1981, Belize was known as British Honduras. English is the national language in the country of 160,000 which is bordered by Mexico and Guatemala.

Next, we selected several possible topics that we could use in demonstration debates to be used as a tool to help educate their students in a short period of time. We researched and prepared for debates on six topics we felt suitable for our audience. All lectures and practice debates were deligently worked on at every spare moment.

Also, we collected all of the debate and communication textbooks we could find to let the students and teachers in Belize for reference material. We were told that no matter how old a book is it still has some value to the people in Belize. The people love books and education so it appeared to be an easy task we were about to undertake.

On February 27 we left cold weather in Michigan and landed in the warmth of Belize. Temperatures range from the low 50's to the high 90's. When our plane landed we did not have any idea what to expect, and we were all afraid and excited at the same time. Once we entered the small airport and found the person in charge of the part of our trip in Belize, we were relieved. He was one of the nicest men and made difficult things like customs inspections look easy. Mr. Godfrey was his name and he appeared to be someone that all the Belizian people respected. Later, we found out he was in charge of secondary education in the country. A post that is second in command of the entire country's educational system.

Early the next morning we were transported by plane to San Pedro High School located on a caye off the coast of Belize. We were greeted by the students, faculty and Principal and made to feel welcome immediately. We did a morning lecture session and appeared to be making progress, at least with the upper division students. In the afternoon session we presented a demonstration debate in hopes that it would clarify the activity. I am not certain how much the students learned, but I know that we gained valuable information that would help us the rest of our trip. First, we learned that the vocabulary difference and speed of speaking created a major communication problem. Secondly, it became obvious that we had selected a poor topic for this audience to be concerned about. It had something to do with the United Nations, and most of the audience had never heard of or did not know enough about the U.N. to carry on a conversation.

Once we discovered our problems we adapted quickly and changed topics along with a new style that fit the needs of the audience.

Success replaced frustration on the part of the debaters and audience. We were able to win a battle that earlier had appeared we were loosing in a big way. We spent some time answering questions and working with the person that would be taking charge of the debate program when we moved on to the next school. We made plans to stay in touch and provide assistance in any way possible. It was obvious that our efforts had been appreciated and would be a foundation for these people to build on for their future.

Next, we went by plane to the Southern part of Belize where we spent a day at Ecumenical High School with one of the most interested groups of people that expressed real desire to learn all they could about debate. We found out quickly that we were at the top academic school in the country. Our lectures were well accepted and the demonstration debate won our debaters many fans. Our entire stay with this school was exciting and rewarding for all involved. We were encouraged and felt certain debate, as we know it, could become a valuable tool in this developing country.

Our next school was really several high schools in Western Belize coming together in an old movie theatre that had been converted into a community center. The audience was much larger and more divided than any we had seen earlier. Over 600 students and teachers filled the community center. This group had us concerned for the first hour and after that they showed so much enthusiasm that we were able to relax and give it our best shot. When we were finished the people of this area spent several hours showing us the outstanding features in their part of Belize. You get a feeling that all Belizians are very proud of their country and want you to share it with them.

When we reached our next assignment in Orange Walk District, it reminded us of some of our earlier stops and we knew what to do for the group. We were debating our demonstration debate and using lecture examples on the "Legalizing Marijuana" topic that had been successful earlier in our tour. Once the debate started I knew something was different, and the audience was not into the topic like we expected. Much to our surprise we found out that we were in the marijuana growing capital of Belize, and that the majority of our audience is directly or indirectly involved with marijuana production.

We survived Orange Walk and moved on to our final destination in Corozal. Corozal was the favorite stop for most of our group and more time was spent there than in any other town. We did our regular lecture and debate with renewed vigor that was met with questions and enthusiasm. This group wanted to learn and get involved in debate to the point that they wanted to do it now. They did not appear afraid and so we put one Belizian student with one Ferris student and made a debate team to show the entire community a debate.

During the time we were working in Corozal, the Prime Minister of the country visited the school. He was very congenial to our group and shared his appreciation to us for what we were doing for his country. The Prime Minister allowed everyone to ask questions and make challenges to his administration. You know democracy has a good start when the Prime Minister was willing to answer questions from an outstanding, sharp Ferris State University debater. He handled every question directly and did not try to hide or beat around the bush.

Over 800 people attended our final presentation that involved two Belizian students. It was the kind of debate that makes us proud of our activity. The Belizians' had every right to be proud of their own students. Both young ladies sounded like they had been debating for years not days. It made me very satisfied with the results of our hard work, and I knew at that point that debate and Belize were going to get along just fine.

The last area I want to discuss is what has transpired since we left Belize. First, one of the young ladies in the final debate traveled to Ferris and is finishing a degree in Pharmacy at present. She has always expressed a desire to be on the debate squad when time allows. Several teachers and principals have traveled to Ferris for Summer sessions and studied more about debate from us. We receive reports from all campuses on the value of our efforts, and I am pleased to conclude that the people of Belize feel it was helpful to their country. I know it was for the Debate program at Ferris an experience of a lifetime.